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European churches and the European parliament elections. The case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

Eila Helander

Abstract:

The article examines the advocacy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), how it positioned itself in relation to the 2014 EU Parliament elections, the aims for which it strove and the strategies it employed to achieve these aims. The article's theoretical framework relies on exchange and resource dependency theories. The empirical approach is qualitative analysis of written documents, observations and interviews. The results reveal that the EU signifies a new dimension for religion in the public domain at both the EU and national levels. A change towards a more proactive public role for the national church in Finland can be detected. In this process transnational ecumenical contacts play an important role. Beneficial exchanges for both the church and politicians are behind the resurgence of religion in the public domain. The results indicate that the public role of religion depends on the balance of power, real or imagined, between political and religious agents.

Key words: Church, advocacy, EU Parliament elections, public religion

1. Introduction

As an institution still seeking to establish its form and practices, the EU has placed European churches in a new situation. The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) introduced for the first time in European history a legal basis for regular dialogue between EU institutions and churches as well as religious associations and non-confessional

organizations. Furthermore, the Treaty of Lisbon strengthened the role of the European Parliament and confirmed the role of the European Commission. This means that the decision-making powers of the EU member states are changing with a consequent impact on churches. Thus, there is no guarantee that the seemingly self-evident ways of viewing religion and related values that have influenced local decision-making processes in a particular country will be preserved at the EU level. Therefore, churches have had the twin goals of negotiating the national legal framework in which they operate and engaging in a direct exchange with the EU (Hatzinger and Schnabel 2009: 46). Moreover, churches have become aware of the need for new strategies for conveying their message on issues of church interest. The monitoring of EU affairs, advocacy and lobbying have become central tools in churches' EU relations.

It is important to note that both the churches and the EU constantly update their goals. Since the early 2000s, the central objective of the EU has been to legitimise its position and strengthen participatory democracy, thus creating various opportunities for churches and religious organizations to become politically involved in the European public sphere (Böllmann 2012). This challenges the secularization thesis' view that institutional differentiation will lead to the marginalization and privatization of religion; several scholars have demonstrated that the public role of religion can take various forms and appear at different levels, including those of the state, political society and civil society (Casanova 1994; Marty 1998; Berger 1999; Habermas 2006). Regarding the EU scholarly interest has mainly focused on the position and the role of religion in EU documents, and the debate regarding the place of religion in

the EU¹ - more specifically that of Christianity - as well as how religion influences the views and attitudes of citizens towards the Union (Leustean and Madley 2010; McCrea 2010; Minkenberg 2009; Nelsen et al. 2001). Nevertheless, compared to US-research with its abundant studies on the activities of religious interest groups, there has been markedly less academic interest in the advocacy of churches within the EU (Leustean 2012; Hill 2009; Houston 2009; Steven 2009); churches' EU-related advocacy on the national level has attracted even less scholarly attention (Guerra 2012). However, existing research indicates that churches and faith based organizations do not act in isolation in EU matters; rather, they have formed close ties through various ecumenical networks (Zimmermann 2014). At a time when European societies are undergoing increasing transnationalization, studying the dynamics of religion at the national level is also relevant for understanding the religious scene in a wider European context.

This article explores how churches' EU-related advocacy is realized at the national level: the focus is on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). In this regard, European Parliament elections provide an opportunity for churches both to monitor the EU policies and politics of various political parties and engage in advocacy regarding the issues it expects candidates to support. The research questions are consequently the following: First, how did the ELCF position itself in relation to the 2014 European Parliament elections and what role did its ecumenical networks play in this process? Second, what were its aims and the strategies employed to achieve them during the campaign? In the next sections the theoretical

¹ Initiated by the former president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, in 1994 by a debate on the 'Soul for Europe'. Delors had identified a need to go beyond a purely economic or legal dimension of the EU.

framework and data are followed by a description of the background to the ELCF's involvement in the public domain. The following section analyses how the church utilizes the elections for open advocacy and the role mutually beneficial exchanges play in it. The findings discuss how the EU signifies a new dimension for religion in the public domain at both the EU and national levels. It is argued that the church's EU-related advocacy strategies are a means of gaining additional power in a changed situation. But acceptance comes at a cost for the church: it has been forced to downplay its religious side. While the EU has provided a new context that enables national churches to engage, they are also constrained by this context.

2. Theoretical framework and data

Advocacy and lobbying can be understood as the two ends of a continuum of action. Advocacy can be defined as pleading in support of a particular issue or course of action through public meetings, speeches, presentations, various media releases and presentations. Lobbying involves face-to-face meetings and diplomacy aimed at influencing members of political parties or decision-makers through semiformal and informal channels.

Advocacy and lobbying are relational activities. Interaction between organizations can be viewed in terms of inter-organizational exchange. Like individuals, organizations evaluate their interactions in terms of the costs and benefits involved (Blau 1964). Exchange theories have been applied to the study of interest group behaviour in the EU context. Interactions between private and public organizations are conceptualized as a series of organizational exchanges. The focus has been on the goods that are exchanged between the two groups. Moreover, in order to gain a fuller picture, the exchange approach has been widened to include the resource

dependence perspective (Bouwen 2002; 2004). According to Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), all organizations require resources, and they must interact with the suppliers of those resources. Consequently, interdependence develops between organizations. This, in turn, provides the possibility for inter-organizational influence and pressure over coveted resources (Bowen 2002: 368). In this article the advocacy of the ELCF in the 2014 European Parliament elections is approached from the exchange and resource dependence perspectives.

The data were gathered from multiple sources. The written documents in the study consist of ELCF documents: the ELCF's EU election leaflet, EU policy papers, reports and press releases and the speech of a bishop concerning the elections as well as the relevant web pages and reports of European ecumenical organizations, especially those of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of the European Churches (CEC/CSC)². The study also made use of observations from the main debate on values arranged by the ELCF. Before the actual debate began, informal interviews were conducted with three electoral candidates, who were then members of the European Parliament, concerning their contacts with and experiences of the ELCF as MEPs. During April-May 2014, a review of media coverage of the ELCF in relation to the EU elections was performed. This included the main religious weekly newspaper *Kotimaa*, the weekly religious newspapers of Lutheran parishes and daily newspapers from those Finnish regions where the ELCF debates were organized. The data were analysed by means of content analysis.

When examining the aims and strategies of the ELCF the focus was on the nature of

² CEC is an ecumenical fellowship of 114 churches from all over Europe. As one of the commissions of CEC, the CSC provided a platform for the CEC membership to reflect on socio-ethical issues ecumenically and to involve them in common action and advocacy in relation to the European Union. In 2013 CEC and CSC merged.

the interaction between the ELCF and political parties; that is, what were the coveted and exchanged resources and the costs and benefits involved?

3. Background

ELCF was a typical state church until 1869, when separation between church and state began to occur. After independence in 1917, the new constitution declared Finland to be a religiously neutral state. By the late 1990s the remaining official ties between church and state had been severed, but due to their long historical and cultural ties, their close relations continued. For example, the opening of the Finnish Parliament begins with a religious service, the state collects church taxes together with income tax, and the position, rights and duties of the Lutheran Church are stipulated in a specific Church Law prepared by the church and accepted by the parliament.

Even though the Church has been actively involved in many social issues, such as helping the poor, general opinion has been against its involvement, as an institution, in politics (Gustafsson 2000: 179). The Lutheran doctrine of the Two Realms has shaped the Nordic countries' understanding of the role of the church: church and state have different functions, but God works through both of them. The church has no special knowledge of how society should be organized. The emphasis is on civil engagement: Christians are called on to serve their fellow human beings, but the Christian community and the church should not take a stand on political issues. However, the understanding of this particular doctrine has varied according to time and place, thus giving room for different emphases on the public role of religion. (Gritsch 2002; Frostin 1994)

During the 20th century, the Finnish Lutheran Church showed interest in social and political issues centering around four themes: values and morality, democracy and order, welfare and the interests of the state (Lauha 2007). Throughout the ELCF's history, there have been a number of pastors and active church members who, as individuals, have engaged in politics, representing different political parties, and have also been elected to the Finnish Parliament (Kokko 2014). Nevertheless, in spite of individual involvement, the demarcation between church and politics has been clear: as an institution the ELCF has avoided involvement in daily politics or siding openly with any particular party. The church's role has been primarily, when called upon by the parliament, to give its views on specific issues. However, since the 1970s, the seeds of change can be detected. Through comments voiced by the Archbishop, the ELCF, as an institution, has begun to express its views on social justice, siding with the poor and marginalized (Yeung 2003; Helander 2002; 1999: 70-73). In recent years the ELCF has also taken concrete actions. In 2011, in connection with the Finnish parliamentary elections, it arranged a public debate on values with the representatives of Finnish political parties. Moreover, after the elections, together with a number of civil organizations, ELCF representatives participated in discussions intended to give voice to the views of civil society in the drafting of the new government's policy programme.

Throughout the history of the EU, discussions on religion, and more specifically the role and position of churches, have surfaced at regular intervals. Ronald McCrea observes that rather than adopting a strictly secular approach designed to exclude religion from public life in the Union, the EU has recognized religion as a valid element of law making. This recognition is provided within the context of civil society in which the Union is committed to maintaining a dialogue with civic organizations,

including religious bodies (McCrea 2010: 61-73). From the 1990s onwards, both EU law and various EU documents, culminating in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, have covered a number of areas touching upon religious matters. Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) states:

1. The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States.
2. The Union equally respects the status under national law of philosophical and non-confessional organizations.
3. Recognizing their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organizations. (EU 2012)

Churches have interpreted Article 17, and especially paragraph 3, as providing legal grounds for their involvement in EU institutions at all levels (COMECE 2010).

According to Böllmann, 'This legitimised agency is the fundament for religious communities' political involvement in the European public sphere' (Böllmann 2012: 213).

4. Results

4.1. Call for politics based on values

In order to understand the ELCF's position, aims and actions in the 2014 EU Parliament election, it is necessary to examine the developments of its EU policy before the elections. In the late 1990s, under the new circumstances brought about by Finland's EU membership, the ELCF had already begun to see the importance of monitoring EU affairs (Isokääntä 2001). Moreover, the ELCF's ecumenical contacts, especially its membership of the European Conference of Churches (CEC), played a

crucial role in these developments. In 2001, the ELCF was among those European churches which collaborated with the Catholic Council of the European Bishops' Conference (COMECE) to produce the *Charta Oecumenica: Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe*. In this document the churches expressed their support for the integration of the European continent, and in order to achieve their goals they chose the strategy of joint action. The CEC, with its Church and Society Commission (CSC), was to be the instrument of its member churches in relation to European institutions (CEC 2001).

In 2002, the Church Council of the ELCF responded to the call to engage in the discussion on the future of the European Union by participating in the Convention on the future of Europe through the public discussion forum³. It took a positive stand on EU enlargement and expressed concern over unhealthy economic developments that were marginalizing the weakest sections of society; furthermore, it expressed the hope that the EU would endeavour to secure the position of such groups. The ELCF also focused on the position of churches in the EU, suggesting that the statement on the status of churches in the Amsterdam Treaty⁴ (1997) be included in a legally binding EU document (Krause 2007).

In 2006, during Finland's EU Presidency, the Church Council of the ELCF and the Finnish Ecumenical Council produced a joint statement: *Churches in Finland and the Finnish EU Presidency 2006*. In this document, which was delivered to the Finnish

³ In December 2001 the European Council decided to set up a Convention on the Future of Europe. In order to be more transparent and democratic involving all citizens, a Forum was opened for organizations representing civil society. Participants were to be informed regularly on the Convention's proceedings thus giving them an opportunity to react and to contribute to the discussion on the future of Europe on a dedicated internet website. European Council 2001. Annex I, 25.

⁴ According to Declaration 11 on the status of churches and non-confessional organizations the European Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the member states. Treaty of Amsterdam 1997, 133.

Prime Minister, Finnish churches gave their support to the Finnish EU Presidency, and expressed their desire for regular dialogue, especially with the Government Secretariat of EU Affairs, on issues 'of importance for the Churches and in which they can give added value to the general debate' (The Finnish Ecumenical Council 2006, 2). The churches considered themselves both the recipients and providers of advice and information vis-à-vis the political decision-makers. The issues were the following: 1. meeting other religions, European identity and tolerance, 2. strengthening the value dimension of the Union and the discussion on the future of the Union, 3. social policy issues, especially eliminating poverty and inequality, 4. combating human trafficking, 5. a loyal, consistent and humane immigration and refugee policy, and 6. a responsible environmental policy (The Finnish Ecumenical Council 2006). The issues presented were in line with the objectives and priorities for the public role of religion expressed by the CEC/CSC and the Catholic Council of the European Bishops' Conference (COMECE). Furthermore, the Director of the CEC/CSC and the General Secretary of COMECE, together with the representatives of the Finnish churches, met the Foreign Minister of Finland to expand on the churches' priorities during the Finnish EU-Presidency. Here the ELCF acted as a local tool for the wider community of European churches.

During the Presidency, a regular dialogue between the Church Council of the ELCF and the Government Secretariat for EU Affairs was initiated. Moreover, the ELCF recognized the importance of cooperation with the CEC/CSC (Kumlin 2007). The ELCF's increasing interest in more effective monitoring of EU affairs was also manifested in its efforts to secure its own liaison officer in Brussels. Between 2006 and 2011 the ELCF, together with the Church of Sweden, employed a liaison

secretary who worked from the CEC/CSC office and whose task it was to monitor EU affairs in Brussels and provide both churches with information of interest.

In 2009 the ELCF published its own policy paper, *The Church and the EU – active participation and commitment to common values*. In the document the ELCF stated its objectives for monitoring EU affairs and its commitment, when needed, to influence decision-making processes both at the national and EU-level. Its priorities echoed the content of the *Charta Oecumenica* and the document released in connection with the EU Presidency (ELCF 2009). In 2012 the ELCF's EU policy paper was revised. Its sub-heading *The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and European Affairs*, can already be interpreted as an indication of the church's more active involvement with the EU. Moreover, compared to the 2009 document, the objectives were more precise and the consequent tasks clearly stipulated (ELCF 2012). Additionally, the interest of the ELCF in monitoring and influencing EU politics is also reflected in its contacts with Finnish members of the European Parliament and in its participation in the dialogue between the Commission and representatives of European religious leaders (Kirkon tiedotuskeskus 2014b; 2012).

The above stated developments reveal that by the 2014 EU Parliament elections, the ELCF had shown increasing interest in EU affairs and organized advocacy. Its EU policy can be described as politics based on values with the aim of promoting the European project and the common good. It can also be argued that since the signing of the *Charta Oecumenica*, the influence of ecumenical inter-church relations on the ELCF cannot be overlooked, as since then the ELCF has increased its proactive efforts to influence political decision-makers.

4.2. Elections are utilized as an opportunity for open advocacy

The participation of Finnish voters in the 2009 EU elections had been tepid with voter turnout at just 40.3 % compared to an EU average of 43 %. Moreover, in 2009 the ELCF had made no special effort to promote the EU elections. In contrast, the CEC/CSC had published, together with three other ecumenical Brussels-based Christian organizations, a guide for churches and Christian organizations which emphasized the importance of voting in the elections (Aprodev et al. 2009). This had prompted little or no reaction from the ELCF. The 2014 elections, however, marked a clear change, not least because the role and powers of the European Parliament had increased significantly since the previous elections. In 2014, as in 2009, the CEC/CSC, together with the same three organizations, published a leaflet on its website urging European churches to promote voter participation in the elections and inviting them to arrange public discussions on Europe's future (CEC/CSC 2014). In its 2009 EU policy paper, the ELCF had already expressed a proactive attitude towards EU affairs: 'The objectives of Church's work on EU affairs is to bring forward perspectives arising from the Christian faith in various issues and, when needed, to influence the decision-making process both on the national and EU-level, and to safeguard the operational preconditions for the Church' (ELCF 2009: 4). Its 2012 policy paper, however, displayed an even wider range of involvement, and it omitted the qualification 'when needed' (ELCF 2012: 6). The information the ELCF had received from the CEC/CSC, the way it had developed its approach to EU matters, and its 2011 experiences from the debate on the Finnish Parliamentary elections all combined to prepare the ground for its advocacy strategy during the 2014 EU elections.

In spring 2014 the ELCF published its own leaflet, *Common values, Common responsibility, Common good* (Suomen ev.lut. kirkko 2014); its content was also

summarized on the CEC/CSC website (CEC/CSC 2014). The document stated that even though the EU was not committed to any religion, events in Europe also concerned the ELCF. Consequently, it was essential for churches and other religious communities to have the right to act and be visible in the public sphere, both at the national and European levels, due to their significant role in European life and in the development of the continent. By referring to the Lisbon Treaty, in which the EU committed itself to open, transparent and regular dialogue with the churches and religious bodies, the ELCF thus legitimized its involvement in the elections: the ELCF wished, together with other churches, to participate in developing this dialogue with European institutions, including the future European Parliament. The leaflet stated that the spiritual, social and ethical foundation of Europe was based on churches and religions, and that the EU's aim should be a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable union that acted in accordance with its common values. The leaflet emphasized that the parliamentary elections gave each citizen the opportunity to influence the direction of the EU's development. Readers were asked to consider the kind of Europe they most desired and were encouraged to act, participate and promote its achievement by voting in the EU elections.

The leaflet issued and expounded five election themes: 1. a Europe of common values, 2. a Europe of the people, 3. a welcoming Europe, 4. a Europe that cares for creation and sustainable development, and 5. freedom of religion. The themes were in line with the ELCF's 2012 EU policy paper and largely conformed to the goals and objectives of the CEC/CSC for making religion public in the EU. According to the ELCF, the EU should be, first and foremost, a union based on common values and the commitment to secure peace and stability in Europe. Therefore, the aim of the church was a more responsible, just, democratic, open, humane and environmentally

friendly Europe. A sense of belonging and community, care for the weakest groups in society and equality for all human beings were presented as the ethical backbone of the EU. Thus, according to the ELCF, the EU should not be evaluated only in terms of competitiveness and economic growth but by the state of its less fortunate citizens. European solidarity was also placed before national interests: responsibility for the weakest groups in Europe could not be overlooked. As a consequence, the ELCF wished to promote the just distribution of wealth in Europe. The leaflet also emphasized the EU's duty to promote global justice. Because each human being was an image of God, the human value and human and basic rights of each immigrant, asylum seeker, refugee and illegal immigrant in the EU were to be respected. According to the ELCF, the strength of Europe's Christian heritage was to be measured by how the EU received immigrants. For example, it was unacceptable that immigrants should need to endanger their lives when trying to enter Europe to achieve a better life. The ELCF urged for an EU immigration and refugee policy based on solidarity and the respect for the value of all human life. Global increases in consumption were perceived as a threat to creation. According to the leaflet, the EU was required to show leadership in combatting climate change and provide a good example by adopting environmental and development policies that were ecologically, socially and globally sustainable. Instead of continuous economic growth and increasing consumption, the ELCF aimed to promote moderation. The leaflet also took a stand on the role of churches and religion in the EU, emphasizing the positive aspects of freedom of religion: the right of churches and other religious bodies to exist, be visible and act in public spaces, both at the national and European levels. Moreover, the fact that Europe was becoming more multicultural and the role of

religions was growing gave churches and other religious communities the opportunity to contribute to the building of a European society based on common values.

Apart from one religious argument, stating that each human being is the image of God, the leaflet did not employ clearly religious arguments or justifications in support of its themes. Indeed, translating religious motivations into secular language seems to be a common trend in the advocacy of faith based organizations in the EU. This is due, it is argued, to religious organizations being better accepted in policy-making processes if they avoid religious topics and translate their visions into secular policy proposals (Foret and Permoser 2015). Instead of merely being a sign of the secularization of the church, such an approach can also be seen as a pragmatic choice in line with the ELCF's theological stance. The Lutheran tradition does not presume that believers have any special knowledge in secular matters on the basis of their faith (Gritsch 2002). Thus, people are able to understand the rationality of an argument with their intellect on the basis of God's general revelation, regardless of their religious conviction and without recourse to religious argument.

Less than a month before polling day, the ELCF arranged a public EU debate on values in the crypt of Helsinki Cathedral, where representatives of the eight political parties fielding candidates in the elections were invited. It was a sign of the high importance given to the event by these parties that seven of the representatives who attended were, in fact, serving members of the European Parliament. The event, where close to 200 people were present, was broadcasted on the internet and transmitted live by a Christian radio station, Radio Dei, enabling the debate to be followed throughout the country. The broadcasting of the event dramatically increased its penetration, as according to Radio Dei, its programmes attract between 15,000 and 20,000 listeners.

Another public debate on the EU-elections was arranged three weeks later in eastern Finland by a rural Lutheran parish together with the local diocese of Kuopio. The evening focused on the EU and its values with a particular emphasis on rural matters. Around one hundred people had gathered to follow the discussion, and two of the eight party candidates present were serving members of the European Parliament (Rytkönen 2014; Karjalainen 2014). It is worth noting that both occasions were arranged in church buildings, and embedded in/by religious expressions. For example, in the first debate, the bishop of the diocese of Espoo ended the evening with a short devotion and called on God to bless the elections and their participants. The event was closed with a well-known Christian hymn, which was sung by the candidates and the audience alike. In the second debate, the local diocesan bishop extended the idea of the church as a haven to the electoral candidates themselves, who would be given the right to express their views in full without fear of the interruptions or challenges typical of TV debates (Jolkkonen 2014). On both occasions the church presented itself as a benevolent partner to European institutions and future MEPs.

In the debates, the candidates were interviewed in relation to the church's EU-themes, through which the ELCF emphasized issues it wished the future MEPs to address and the direction of the actions it desired them to take. In Helsinki the candidates were also asked, if elected, how they intended to increase the dialogue between churches and the EU mentioned in the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, so as to end the careful and allergic attitude of the EU to religion. In Helsinki, the ELCF emphasized that its views were not limited to Christianity by inviting a representative of the Muslim community to address the candidates. In her

speech the Muslim representative highlighted the importance of recognizing religion in society and called for a better religious literacy from political decision-makers.

Furthermore, the ELCF information centre had released information to the media about the Church's EU themes and the forthcoming values debate in Helsinki (Kirkon tiedotuskeskus 2014a). Nevertheless, the leaflet and the public debates failed to attract the kind of media attention the church had anticipated. Apart from the broadcasting of the Helsinki event, the only coverage the debates received was in the reports and editorials of religious weekly papers, with the exception of a secular regional daily newspaper which reported on the second debate because it was arranged within its catchment area (Hirvonen 2014; Rytönen 2014; Karjalainen 2014).

Religious motivations played their part in the ELCF's involvement in the European elections. The ecumenical contacts and the EU's statutes contributed significantly to a proactive attitude in the process of utilizing the elections as an opportunity for open advocacy.

4.3. Mutually beneficial exchange behind the resurgence of religion in the public domain

The debates functioned for both the ELCF and the candidates as a forum for obtaining important resources. For the church, this concerned securing its future involvement with EU institutions, including forging good relations with potential members of the European Parliament and gaining access to functioning channels of information and influence in the EU. For the parliamentary candidates, the most urgently needed resource was popular support, expressed through voting. Research on the European Parliament reveals that the issue of religion is raised not out of

choice but because of the necessity of handling issues intrinsically connected with religion, such as identity, ethics and culture (Foret 2014). Thus, those candidates with prior experience of working in the European Parliament were undoubtedly aware of the value of having good contacts with the ELCF. If re-elected, functioning contacts with the church as a source of valuable expert knowledge, would be useful.

For the ELCF the costs involved were linked to maintaining its political neutrality.

However, according to *Gallup Ecclestica* 2011, in spite of the separation between church and state, the majority of Finns were favorably disposed to their cooperation.

People's understanding of the task and role of the church in society was also clear: three-fourths of those surveyed thought that the church should speak and work more for the weak and marginalized and be more vocal about social problems, thereby encouraging it to engage in active discussion with society (Haastettu kirkko 2012: 48, 55-57). However, in spite of public opinion and the acknowledgement and legitimation given to church involvement with EU institutions by the Lisbon Treaty, the ELCF seems somewhat apologetic with regard to its advocacy, being eager to emphasize that its EU themes were not an expression of political views or a statement linked to any political party; instead they were simply an expression of Christian values and the views of the people (Kirkon tiedotuskeskus 2014a). It was also argued that since politics entailed the handling of issues of joint interest to church and state, it was entirely appropriate that the themes listed in the ELCF's leaflet, such as social justice, peace and freedom of religion, matters also discussed in the Bible, were explored in a debate on values. Consequently, so it was argued, church buildings were more than suitable locations for the EU debate (Jolkkonen 2014). The delicate position of the ELCF was also reflected in the comments of the regional daily paper, which claimed that even though election panel discussions had

not previously taken place in a church, politics seemed rather suited to a church setting (Karjalainen 2014). Such a statement can be interpreted as an effort to challenge established views on the demarcation between religion and politics.

The fear of accusations of involvement in politics can also be seen in the ELCF's post-election comments. While the ELCF expected good cooperation and regular contact with Finnish MEPs so as to stay informed on issues important to the church, it emphasized that this did not constitute lobbying (Seppälä 2014). Nevertheless, this more than adequately fulfils the criteria for lobbying. By expressing its views on EU issues and by taking a proactive role in relation to political parties and their electoral candidates, the ELCF seems to have been acutely aware of the danger of going against public opinion on the role of the church in politics. Therefore, it was crucial that even though the issues were indeed highly political, they were approached from the perspective of values, thereby allowing the church to maintain the impression of non-involvement in politics.

Three types of costs for the candidates were identified. The first is of private nature: in the middle of a busy campaign, the candidates were willing to give their time to the church. The second type of costs, for those candidates who were not religiously active or members of a church, involved taking part in a church-arranged discussion in a church building and thus stepping outside their comfort zone. The third, depending on the party, involved the need to avoid the label of being too religious, which might, in turn, have negatively affected the candidate's party or their position in the eyes of voters ambivalent (or even hostile) to religion and the church. In particular, this may have been the case with those whose party, such as the Left Alliance and the Social Democratic Party, had previously taken a strong stance in

favour of the separation between church and state and of religion being a private matter.

Both the ELCF and the electoral candidates also had much to gain from their encounters. The benefits that the ELCF hoped to receive included the possibility of presenting its views both to the candidates and also to voters. In this way, the ELCF hoped to influence voters' choice of candidate and engineer an election result favourable to its goals. Other research shows that the more people participate in European Parliament elections, the more they tend to hold positive attitudes toward the EU (Jeong 2012). Thus, a high voter turnout would have simultaneously worked toward the ELCF's aim of supporting European integration. The ELCF's value debates gave the candidates the opportunity to present their views to an audience other than the usual participants in political rallies and thus also gain potential support from outside the circles of their political party. Some scholars have argued that the effect of advocacy depends, among other things, on how well advocates are perceived to represent the views of the larger population (Baumgartner et al. 2009: 127). Considering the established majority status of the Lutheran Church in Finnish society, it is likely that the candidates saw the benefits of participating in the debates as outweighing the costs.

4. Conclusions and discussion

Though a secular institution, the EU has provided churches with new forums for exercising political influence. The European Parliament elections have the potential to become a channel at the national level for the positioning of religion in the public domain. In its advocacy, the emphasis of the ELCF is on civil society involvement. But it also defends its right to act in the political arena by appealing to tradition,

including the special status that churches are perceived to have in European societies and in the life of its people as upholders of European cultural heritage and Christian values.

In this regard, one of the aims of European ecumenical organizations is to bring religion in the institutional setting of the EU into the public sphere. This and European churches' attempts to present a united front have also influenced the position of religion in the public domain at the national level. Consequently, a change in the ELCF towards a more proactive role in politics can be detected. During the EU election campaign, the ELCF openly promoted the specific issues and values shared by other European churches and strived to encourage citizens' active participation in the elections. Therefore, when studying the role of religion in the public domain, even at the national level, we cannot overlook churches' transnational contacts and ecumenical collaboration, as well as deepening European integration.

The ELCF's efforts to influence politics and thus to increase its role in EU affairs can also be seen as arising from the economic and political situation at home. At a time when the consequences of EU membership are the subject of intense debates in Finland, and where the future of the EU has been challenged by some political parties, the ELCF is faced with a thorny dilemma. On the one hand, by signing the *Charta Oecumenica* it has committed itself, together with other European churches, to supporting European integration. On the other hand, in Finland criticism of the EU is strong in populist right-wing circles, where the EU is perceived as failing to promote the good of ordinary people. It can be argued that with its strong focus on work with the disadvantaged and through its advocacy in the EU elections, the ELCF wishes to emphasize the need and importance of caring for the weak and marginalized. In so doing, however, the ELCF is also challenging the value base of an EU driven

primarily by economic goals. Thus, it could also be claimed that the ELCF's campaign was intended to increase its credibility in the eyes of its members and the wider public as an institution of human values in an increasingly commercialized world.

The results of this study also raise the question of how the involvement of religious institutions in politics has to be understood. In Finland, strong political and religious views on the separation between religion and politics have shaped the church's understanding of its role in the public domain. In the ELCF, political involvement has been primarily understood as siding with a particular political party, even though the ELCF has been careful to avoid explicitly supporting any political party, both in its EU publications and debates, it has nevertheless presented a clear vision of the direction in which it hopes politicians will move. The emphasis the ELCF places on values also begs the question of whether discussions on values are actually a form of political activity. Through its advocacy of politics based on values, the ELCF is certainly aiming to become an active player in EU politics.

The shift in the church's role in society is due both to the changes arising from EU membership discussed at the beginning of this article and to the flexibility of the church's theological understanding of its role. Consequently, the findings of this study indicate that when investigating the resurgence of religion in the public domain it is also necessary to examine the doctrinal views of religious organizations.

The Church's EU-related advocacy strategies can be interpreted not only as an attempt to entrench its existing position but also as a means of gaining additional power in a changed situation. Exchanges beneficial to both political and religious actors play their part in the resurgence of religion in the public domain. The role of

religion in the public domain depends on the balance of power, imaginary or real, between political and religious agents. Nevertheless, acceptance comes at a cost for the church. In order to gain access to the EU halls of power, it has been forced to temper its religious side. How this affects the way the church perceives itself as a religious agent requires further research.

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